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Oregon Fires Exacerbate COVID-19 Impact on Farmworkers

Results of Statewide Farmworker Survey Announced at Press Conference Tuesday, September 22nd at 11:00 am PST

Portland, Oregon — The Oregon COVID-19 Farmworker Study Team (a consortium of 11 farmworker-serving organizations and academics from Portland State University, University of Oregon, and Oregon State University) announces the preliminary survey findings from more than 200 farmworkers living across all of Oregon. The initial findings provide unique insights into the conditions of these essential workers during the pandemic that are now exacerbated by historic wildfires. Preliminary results from this unique study—the only statewide survey to gather data directly from farmworkers currently working through COVID—will be released at a virtual press conference on September 22nd, 2020 at 11 am PST. The results, also to be included in an accompanying research data brief, provide critical missing information on worksite conditions and farmworkers’ abilities to protect themselves while continuing to harvest the food that feeds Oregonians and consumers nationwide and globally.

The COVID-19 global pandemic exacerbated by unprecedented wildfires in Oregon has demonstrated that farmworkers deemed "essential" are on the climate crisis's frontlines, worsening already hazardous working conditions to maintain food on our tables. Oregon's farmworker population as a group, of which a significant subsection are Latinx and Indigenous to Mexico and Guatemala, have experienced disproportionately higher rates of COVID-19 infection than people from other ethnic backgrounds and work industries. Oregon Health Authority's COVID-19 weekly report continues to highlight food packing and agricultural worksites as uniquely vulnerable to the spread of the virus due to workflows and other factors that create an overrepresentation of cases suffered by people of color in agricultural worksites—such as high infection rates in agriculture areas like Umatilla, Morrow, and Malheur Counties.

Despite challenges, our research finds Oregon farmworkers are demonstrating a serious commitment to safety in the face of COVID-19. Many are confronting economic, health, and social challenges without adequate safety nets and protections. The consequences signal a new normal, demanding immediate attention to maintain farmworkers' safety and well-being at work and home. Initial findings include:

1. When personal protective equipment and masks are available, farmworkers take necessary precautions and follow safety procedures at home and in the workplace to minimize exposure to COVID-19.
2. Farmworkers report periods during the working day when they lack appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and cannot socially distance, despite saying that employers have taken some steps to prevent COVID-19 infection.
3. Farmworkers experienced a significant loss of work and income during the COVID-19 pandemic creating broad economic challenges.
4. Farmworkers know people infected or have been directly exposed to COVID-19, but few report getting tested. Cost and fear of losing a job are significant barriers to accessing testing and care.
5. Few farmworkers have the means to quarantine or isolate if they or someone in their household is sick.
6. One-half or more of farmworkers surveyed remain unaware of paid sick leave benefits and existing relief funds organized by the federal government and State of Oregon.
7. Farmworkers that speak Indigenous languages face additional information and accessibility gaps. Oregon Indigenous farmworkers speak at least 22 different languages from Guatemala and Mexico (such as Triqui, Mixtec, Mam, Kanjobal, among others) and many are not fluent or literate in Spanish.
8. Farmworkers are also caregivers. Farmworkers have trouble accessing affordable childcare and supporting their children’s education with the shift to remote classes.
9. Farmworkers are feeling increasing stress levels affecting their emotional well-being yet most lack access to mental health services.
10. Farmworkers worry greatly about family members outside the U.S. and the pandemic has resulted in a significant reduction in remittances sent to families in Mexico and Guatemala who depend on them.

To register for the Zoom webinar go to: https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_Kce6d3L8Q8i6WKQV8bwtLg

Registered participants will receive a press kit including the full Preliminary Data Brief and a Policy and Action Brief that will be shared with legislators at the upcoming special session of the Oregon state legislature. Those policy proposals can be found here.

The Oregon COFS Team will be represented by: Jennifer Martinez (Portland State University and Principal Investigator), Lynn Stephen (University of Oregon), Ron Mize (Oregon State University), CASA of Oregon, Bienestar, Centro Cultural de Washington, Farmworker Housing Development Corporation, Oregon Law Center, UNITE. Reyna Lopez (PCUN, Farmworkers and Latinx Working Families United), Ubaldo Hernandez (Comunidades), and a slate of scholars will be available for the question and answer discussion.

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The Oregon COVID-19 Farmworker Survey is part of a three-state effort (Oregon, California, and Washington) coordinated by the California Institute for Rural Studies with participation from a wide group of farmworker organizations, researchers, and policy advocates. The study has been generously supported in Oregon by the Oregon Community Foundation, CASA of Oregon, and the University of Oregon. A full list of project partners and supporters is available at www.covid19farmworkerstudy.org.
Covid-19 Farmworker Study

The COVID-19 Farmworker Study (COFS) will provide critical missing information on farmworkers’ abilities to protect themselves and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study brings together a collective of community-based organizations, researchers and advocates to reveal information that can only be gathered directly from farmworkers who have been working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are using two research tools, a phone-based quantitative survey and an in-depth interview, to bring the voices of farmworkers into the public conversation about how to respond to the pandemic. COFS is also a tool for funnelling resources (in the form of study funds) to community-based organizations and to workers themselves.
Conclusions and Recommendations for Action

Based on the findings, the Oregon COFS policy and action committee have endorsed the following nine policy recommendations that will be presented to various committees and legislators in the upcoming special session. Each recommendation is based on what we have learned from farmworkers navigating the difficulties of COVID-19, forest fires, and displacement.

1. Replenish income and safety net support for farmworkers regardless of documentation status, such as the Oregon Workers Relief Fund, COVID-19 Farmworker Rental Relief Fund, and expand qualifications for Oregon Worker Quarantine Fund.

2. Expand stock of housing opportunities that can serve farmworker families facing housing insecurity and/or needing temporary quarantining shelter with adequate social distancing.

3. Enforce existing anti-retaliation and workplace protections that assure farmworkers can take time off and/or can file employer complaints without fear of retribution, such as supporting stronger Whistleblower protections and abolishing farm labor collective bargaining restrictions.

4. Strengthen Oregon/OSHA occupational safety enforcement and worksite auditing activities, including random inspections.

5. Provide compensation for farmworkers who were forced to take time-off work and/or relied on informal networks for caretaking/childcare responsibilities due to the closure of childcare facilities and transition to virtual education since the start of COVID-19.

6. Implement digital literacy programs to improve farmworker families’ access to technology, such as supplying smartphones, tablets, and stipends to offset internet service costs.

7. Mandate employers provide training, when not already required, in languages farmworkers speak and provide targeted plans to improve language accessibility of information, rules, guidance published by government agencies, by funding local organizers and navigators that can reach and inform farmworkers who speak Indigenous languages.

8. Provide frequent and extensive access to COVID-19 testing with convenient access to lab results, vaccinations when available, and access to traditional methods of mental health support administered through trusted community clinics.

9. Ease barriers for exercising legal rights by connecting farmworkers to legal navigators that can provide legal advice on workplace rights, tenant rights, concerns over public charge, and immigrant rights.

“Workers can’t maintain distance, because when we pack the flowers the band runs very fast and we need the help of other people and that is why we can’t distance sufficiently.”

*Nursery Farmworker, Woodburn, OR*
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